



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Thursday, May 15, 2008

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Montana's Tourism & Recreation Industry Partners Complete 5-year Strategic Plan

(HELENA) – In culmination of a process that involved the participation of over 1,200 Montanans, the state's tourism industry is unveiling its newly updated 5-Year Montana Tourism and Strategic Plan for 2008-2012. Some of the top priorities set forth in the plan include: enhancing and preserving what's so special about Montana while strengthening visitation in "off peak" seasons; targeting "high value, low impact" niche market visitors; connecting more visitors with Montana-made and grown products; and increasing the capacity of community, regional and tribal tourism organizations. The statewide plan is available at www.travelmontana.mt.gov/2008strategicplan.

Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer congratulates the hundreds of Montanans who helped create the statewide tourism plan. He called it "a blueprint for action – a path to follow" that "sets high standards for tourism and recreation development and promotion which, when achieved, will deliver great economic and social benefits across the state."

"By 2012, at the end of the path laid out in the plan, Montana's 10 million-plus visitors will be enjoying more Montana-made and grown products. They'll be sharing more of their wealth with Montana businesses and communities of all sizes. And those of us who are the stewards of this special place will have more resources to protect and enhance the cultural, historical and natural assets that we value – the parts of Montana that create that special connection within us all," said Governor Schweitzer.

Montana Department of Commerce Director Anthony J. Preite said the plan is an important tool for the forty-six public and private business stakeholder groups that have taken responsibility for implementing its eighty-six actions designed to achieve ten agreed upon goals.

“The strategic plan helps all the stakeholder groups identify priorities for their individual efforts and resources, encourages partnerships to pool those resources for more effect and emphasizes measuring and reporting so all Montanans can understand and appreciate the results coming from this concerted statewide effort,” said Director Preite.

In 2007, an estimated 10.6 million nonresident visitors came to Montana and spent close to \$3 billion. These visitors and revenues support facilities and services that contribute to Montana’s quality of life and, in some cases, could not be supported by residents alone. While total nonresident tourism expenditures more than doubled from 1995 to 2007, and industry growth continues to be strong, the plan points out there is much room for improvement. For example: in 2006, there were 4.6 million vacant hotel room nights statewide, primarily in the off-peak seasons. Also, Montana and the nation lost market share among destination vacation travelers due to aggressive marketing efforts of emerging destinations, both international and domestic.

The plan states that to remain competitive “Montana needs to capitalize on its strengths (high quality outdoor experiences, clean air and water, authenticity, tribal culture, history, arts, and affordability), and address its weaknesses (lack of public-private sector coordination and communication, lack of resources for asset management and marketing, workforce gaps, and transportation infrastructure needs).”

Specifically addressing some of these issues, the plan notes that since “half of Montana’s visitor spending occurs in June through September” tourism sustainability will be enhanced if the industry “emphasizes maintaining summer performance while increasing off-peak season visitation through targeted promotions, an integrated visitor information system and themed product development.” The plan says “resources to create these results will come from increased state promotion funding, leveraging of private money, and enacting local tools like the Tourism Business Improvement District to bolster local marketing and professional development.” Other key actions in the plan include public awareness of tourism benefits and impacts; sustainable management of natural, cultural and historic assets; and workforce training and housing.

Another priority action is more focused product development and marketing to niche groups like geotravelers, wildlife and bird watchers, photographers, scenic drivers, adventure travelers, sporting events, cultural and heritage travelers and other specialty groups that have an appreciation for the state’s culture, heritage, environment, and care about its social well-being. First-time visitors are a target market since research shows that once a visitor comes to Montana their expectations are exceeded and many – 83% - become repeat visitors.

The Montana Tourism and Recreation Strategic Plan 2008-2012 is the 4th in a series of plans created by a statewide public and private sector planning process. The first was developed in 1992.

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